

SWEETGRASS *Hierochloe odorata* (L.)

Beauv.

plant symbol = HIOD

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Rose Lake Plant Materials Center



Robert H. Mohlenbrock
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Alternate Names

The plant "sweetgrass" consists of two different taxa: *Hierochloe odorata* (L.) Beauv. HIOD and *Hierochloe hirta* (Schrank) var. *arctica* (J.Presl) G.Weim. HIHIA; vanilla grass, holy grass, Seneca grass, alpine sweetgrass

Uses

Cultural: The cultural uses of sweetgrass include ceremonial incense, perfume, hair wash, bedding, basketry, dermatological aid, cold remedy, cough medicine, eyewash, febrifuge, respiratory aid, analgesic, insecticide, veterinary aid, decoration and adornment.

Because of the sweet, vanilla-like fragrance that develops once the plant has been harvested and

begins to dry the use of sweetgrass as incense and fragrance is fairly ubiquitous among Native American tribes. The longer leaves are often braided and burned for religious and peace ceremonies, to invoke good power, and for various other rituals of cultural significance. In addition, sweetgrass has been utilized for several medicinal and cosmetic purposes. Whether alone, as adornment and perfume, or soaked in water for tea and other solutions the therapeutic applications of sweetgrass are scattered throughout the tribes. Another traditional use of this invoke good power, and for various other rituals of cultural significance. In addition, sweetgrass has been utilized for several medicinal and cosmetic purposes. Whether alone, as adornment and perfume, or soaked in water for tea and other solutions the therapeutic applications of sweetgrass are scattered throughout the tribes. Another traditional use of this plant, particularly among the people of the Great Lakes and Northeast, is in handicrafts. Sweetgrass is often employed to craft or decorate baskets, bowls, trays and mats.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

Sweetgrass is a native perennial grass. The culms are semi-erect, up to 30 inches tall and arise from slender, creeping rhizomes. Leaves are few, rough-edged and have shiny, hairless undersides. Often it has a reddish-purple color near the base of the plant. The highly prized longer leaves that grow on sterile shoots reach 18+ inches in length. The inflorescence is an open, pyramid-shaped, golden brown panicle with slender branches. Spikelets have 3 florets with awnless lemmas; glumes are thin, translucent and nearly equal in length. The fruit is a caryopsis.

Adaptation and Distribution

Both taxa of sweetgrass are circumpolar, and native to both the western and eastern hemispheres. In North America their extensive range traverses the northern regions from Alaska to Newfoundland, moving down to New England, across the Great Lakes region and the upper Midwest to Oregon, and into the Southwest. Sweetgrass usually inhabits moist ground on shores (fresh or brackish), meadows, low prairies, at the edges of woods, bogs and marshes. Normally, it is not found in pure

stands but among other grasses and shrubs in mid-successional communities.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

Establishment

Sweetgrass spreads vigorously by often-deep creeping rhizomes. In the spring these rhizomes produce inconspicuous fruiting stems with sparse, short leaves. Longer leaves develop later from separate sterile basal shoots. Although sweetgrass can reproduce by seed, it is mostly infertile, producing few seedheads that contain few seeds. Sweetgrass is extremely cold hardy. It will go dormant in cold weather and resprout once ground temperatures reach 40 °F. For the Great Lakes, Northeastern and Midwestern regions flowering begins in the spring.

Sweetgrass development from seed is very slow. This coupled with the infertile nature of the plant explains why plant division is the most successful method of reproducing sweetgrass. Dividing a plant is accomplished by separating the individual propagules that have developed from the rhizomes of a spreading plant. Each propagule can then be placed in a container for further separation or future planting. Newly separated plants will do best if placed in the shade for 2–3 weeks while their roots establish. After this, transplant at 1-foot spacings into areas of partial shade to full sun.

Management

As sweetgrass is not drought tolerant, keep the soil moist but not saturated. Fertilize with a balanced lawn-starter 2-3 times during the establishment year and years following harvests. Organic fertilizers may also be used at 5 lbs. per 100 square feet. Sweetgrass should be weeded at least every other year.

Longer leaves of the sterile shoots may be harvested several times during the year, however, the mid-season growth is considered to be superior. These leaves are gathered by grasping the shoots firmly near the ground and pulling until they break from the rootstock an inch or two below the surface of the soil.

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